Testimony of Steve Kelly

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The testimony of Steve Kelly, a small business owner and environmental consultant residing in Bozeman, Montana. This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Inc. for the July 2, 2003 House Committee on Resources field hearing at Seeley Lake, Montana.

Management Challenges on Montana's National Forests

Chairman Pombo, Representative Rehberg, and members of the Committee, my name is Steve Kelly for the record. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies. The Alliance is a bioregional grassroots network based in Missoula, Montana comprised of hundreds of small businesses and conservation organizations and thousands of individual members working together to maximize support for environmental protection and restoration of the Northern Rockies bioregion. Our area of concern includes the mountainous regions of Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Eastern Oregon and Washington. Our collective mission is to secure the ecological integrity of the bioregion through citizen empowerment and the application of conservation biology, sustainable economic models, and environmental law.

These world-class forested landscapes are unique because they contain some of the largest intact forests in the earth's temperate zones. These forest ecosystems are still home to all the native plant and animal species that were here at the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition 200 years ago. Free-roaming populations of grizzly bears, gray wolves, bison, woodland caribou, wolverine, mountain goats, anadromous salmon, bull trout and cutthroat trout are found here in "America's Serengeti." Recreational opportunities abound in popular destinations like Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks and on the national forest system lands that provide critical biological linkages between these protected national treasures. Our public forests also provide us with clean water, wildlife, spectacular scenery, and unmatched opportunities for hunting, fishing hiking and recreation. These public values represent the foundation of our quality of life. It is this generation's challenge, and our obligation I believe, to protect and restore our natural heritage for future generations.

We must never lose sight of why national forest system lands were created in the first place, and why working Americans from all 50 states have willingly invested their hard-earned tax dollars in public forests for over a century. These are America's public forests.

The greatest challenges facing our National Forests can be traced back to the Creative Act, which established the system of National Forest Reserves in 1891. The disagreement over how to interpret the Act is memorialized in the philosophy and teachings of two historical conservation greats, John Muir and Gifford Pinchot. Muir sided with Secretary of the Interior John Noble's interpretation of the Act as primarily preservationist in nature, while Pinchot sided with the Forestry Division Chief, Bernard Fernow, who held that the government should prioritize timber management and productivity in the German tradition of forestry, which viewed the forest as a farm, producing commodities for human consumption.

In 1897 Congress passed the "Organic Act," enacting strict laws governing timber harvest on the Forest Preserves. With the blessing of President Theodore Roosevelt and Congress in 1905, Pinchot seized control of Forest Preserves, shifting jurisdiction out of Interior into Agriculture where they became known as National Forests. In his first two years as Chief, Pinchot passionately pursued his utilitarian/development agenda, which increased timber sales by 1000 percent. This great controversy is about values, and is fundamental to our understanding of today's disagreement between those primarily concerned for the integrity and beauty of the biotic community, and those who rationalize the exploitation of nature for human consumption.

In 1976, Congress passed the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the first legislation to enforce

substantive statutory restrictions on the Forest Service. The Act was a response by Congress to restore public faith and trust in Forest Service management, a crisis in confidence caused by an insensitivity to the public's growing concern over the expenditure of public funds and the environmental destruction caused by the excessive clear-cutting and road-building of our public forests. The debate rages on.

The Bush Administration's attitude and philosophy toward public forests represents a radical departure from the intent of NFMA to restore the "rule of reason" as envisioned by the Committee of Scientists. Apparently determined to deregulate and privatize our national forests, the White House appointed a former timber lobbyist assistant undersecretary of agriculture in charge of managing national forests. Today, any reasonable hope of striking a better balance between subsidized extractive uses and respect for public values like water, wildlife and solitude seems remote at best.

Congress has been all too willing to support the Administration's agenda, abandoning the long-standing practice of avoiding timber harvest where production costs exceed public benefits and where logging causes irreparable harm to fish and wildlife habitat, endangered species, clean water and healthy watersheds.

According to two General Accounting Office (GAO) reports (GAO-03-538, GAO-03-503, attached) issued in March, 2003, "the Forest Service has made little real progress in resolving its long-standing performance accountability problems and, based on the status of its current efforts, remains years away from implementing a credible performance accountability system." In the meantime, all ten Montana national forests continue to lose money on their timber programs.

Since the famous Yellowstone Fires of 1988, Western states have experienced big fire years in 1994, 1996, 2000 and in 2002. As the current drought persists, this string of impressive natural events will continue, with or without applying prescribed fire, thinning and other costly mechanical treatment methods.

Big skies, big trucks, extreme weather conditions, and fire are all part of everyday life in the West. When conditions are right, fires will burn uncontrollably, even in logged areas, or subdivisions, with good road access. Despite our unflagging efforts to control nature, wildfire, like floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes, occur randomly. Even severe fire seasons do not constitute an emergency, but rather a normal fire sequence in a fire-prone ecosystem. Get used to it, wildfire – even the so-called "catastrophic" variety – is a natural, inevitable process.

In reaction to nature's recurring disregard for human efforts to suppress fire, fire-fighting costs are on the rise. In 2002, the U.S. Forest Service alone spent a record $1.2 billion, a big jump up from the $256 million spent by all federal agencies in 1997. As Congress throws more money at the problem it helped create, there has been a corresponding rise in expectations of the constituency. But the intensity of the political controversy encircling government officials who must decide how best to manage our public lands appears to be doing more harm than good. Government is once again making promises it cannot possibly keep.

To make matters worse, some politicians and special-interest groups have exploited public fear of wildfires to rush fire-related forest legislation through the U.S. House of Representatives to leverage expanded logging on public lands.

For example, the "Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003," under the guise of protecting rural communities from fire, deregulates logging in roadless areas and threatened and endangered species habitat, and gives the Secretary "sole discretion" to log old growth areas. The bill also permits the Forest Service to conduct logging without considering any alternatives, and creates legal exemptions for an unlimited number of projects (up to 1,000 acres each) for lands that agencies claim are at risk of insect infestation.

The bill eliminates the statutory right of citizens to appeal Forest Service logging projects, and directs federal courts to rule with the Forest Service and BLM, regardless of which laws are violated, whenever agencies claim their actions will restore fire-adapted ecosystems. For all those hoping that Congress and President Bush will deliver a panacea, prepare for disappointment. In reality, more logging will not lessen the impact of wildfire or make them more controllable.

Alterations to the home and vegetation within 200 feet can effectively reduce home losses. We must focus our attention on preventative actions within this zone of 200 feet, commonly referred to as the wild land/urban interface. People who choose to reside in the wild land/urban interface must take responsibility for reducing the chance their house or cabin will burn down. It is equally important to accept the fact that when burning conditions are right, no home is totally safe.

Using science as our guide, the only logging that makes sense is very selective, and located within the wild land/urban interface. There is little scientific evidence to show that thinning will prevent fires in drought years. Many scientists caution that improper thinning could damage ecosystems and actually make forests more vulnerable to fire. Cumulatively, our public forests have not recovered from prior abuses, which have dried out entire ecosystems.

The decision to spend billions of tax dollars annually to log, thin and burn public wild lands should be based on solid science, not on pork-barrel politics. At an estimated average cost of more than $1,600 per acre – a cost that far exceeds the commercial value of most forests in the Northern Rockies – President Bush's plan to expedite Forest Service thinning projects has already squandered more than $400 million in the last two years.

Roads and logging have increased the likelihood of wildfire by 2 times and the likelihood of human-caused fire by 4 times when compared to unroaded areas. Right here in the Swan Valley there are 20% more road miles than stream miles (1,729 roads/1,437 streams), a major cause of sediment pollution. Thinning at a landscape level is an experiment with one surefire outcome: greater dependence on federal assistance and bigger federal agency budgets – that's money over and above the $7 billion Montana received in federal aid last year.

The last thing we need is more widespread logging on public lands, bigger logging subsidies and a bigger federal bureaucracy. Instead, we need to expand our knowledge of forest function and wildfire, and fight against self-serving politicians and lobbyists who hype the fear of wildfire as a means to achieve political ends and obtain quick cash.

We need a better forest plan, one that prioritizes on-the-ground actions in the wildland/urban interface, spending increasingly scarce tax dollars wisely. By moving proactively, homeowners can improve the odds of home survival. Restoring forests and watersheds will require removing roads, not the trees. Once this is accomplished, we can use science and education in a similar fashion to find the common ground necessary to successfully tackle more complex public forest problems in the future.

In the backcountry, congressional protection of national forest system lands is the most cost-effective method of insuring that future generations have special public places to fish and hunt. And the wisest thing we could do to spur economic prosperity is to protect our forests, restore water quality and respect our quality of life.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.